

MEMORANDUM

319

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

INFORMATION

~~SECRET SPOKE~~

January 16, 1975

MEMORANDUM FOR:

GENERAL SCOWCROFT

FROM:

KENNETH M. QUINN *CKM*

SUBJECT:

Likelihood of Communist Closure of Mekong

*Thamho. B*

You have previously indicated an interest in whether the Communists had the ability to interdict the Mekong River for a sufficiently long enough time to interrupt our supply efforts. The Defense Department addressed this subject (Tab B) and concluded that Khmer Communist forces are not strong enough to accomplish this.

The intelligence community, at the request of Phil Habib, has also studied this question. At Tab A is a copy of their memorandum. It concludes that:

-- Communists have clearly embarked on a major campaign to interdict the Mekong.

-- For the next 3 months or so they can not keep the river closed.

-- At present levels of combat and present levels of U.S. aid, the fighting capabilities of FANK will deteriorate this spring. If that happens, FANK's ability to keep the Mekong open will also decline.

The intelligence community is in the process of preparing a new NIE on Cambodia which should be completed some time in February. It will examine further the military and political aspects of the Cambodian situation as well as prospects for negotiations.

~~SECRET SPOKE~~ XGDS

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*Cambodia—Likelihood of  
Communist Closure of the Mekong*

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13 January 1975

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January 13, 1975

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CAMBODIA -- LIKELIHOOD OF COMMUNIST CLOSURE OF THE MEKONG\*

KEY POINTS

- The Khmer Communists (KC) have clearly embarked on a major campaign to interdict the Mekong this dry season (i.e., now through June), in order to close Phnom Penh's critical supply line.
- Our best judgment is that for the next three months or so the KC cannot keep the Mekong interdicted.
  - During this period, the Cambodian Army (FANK) will be able to provide enough security for the movement of those convoys essential to the continued survival of the government.
  - At present levels of combat and present levels of US military aid, the fighting capabilities of FANK will deteriorate this spring. If that happens, FANK's ability to keep the Mekong open will also decline.

*\* This memorandum was drafted by the Defense Intelligence Agency and concurred in by the Central Intelligence Agency, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, and the representatives of the service intelligence agencies.*

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## THE DETAILS

Khmer Communist Intentions

1. The KC have clearly embarked on a major effort to interdict the Mekong this dry season (i.e., between now and the end of June 1975). Several recently intercepted messages among top KC leaders have in fact stated that closing the Mekong River is a primary objective of the Communist military campaign this dry season, and it is evident that present KC military actions are tailored to this end. The insurgents now hold strong positions along the river between Phnom Penh and the Cambodian border with South Vietnam, and they are simultaneously conducting operations against the capital's perimeter to keep FANK intervention forces tied down in that area.
2. At this point, the KC have committed about 10,000 troops to the Mekong interdiction effort, more than in either of the two previous years. They have seized most of the banks on both sides of the river south of the GKR's naval base at Neak Luong, and a strip 10 miles long on the west bank of the river north of the naval base. They thus hold -- at the moment -- river banks in two key areas where the river narrows to about 500 meters, one north and one south of Neak Luong. During last year's dry season, the heaviest shellings against Phnom Penh-bound convoys occurred at these locations. The KC are also planning, according to intercepted messages, to expand their holdings along the river, and they intend to try to capture Neak Luong itself. About a battalion of FANK troops was sent to Neak Luong on January 12. Without additional reinforcements, the FANK garrison would be hard-pressed to hold the town.
3. Some recent KC messages have suggested that the KC might try to barricade the river -- a tactic attempted by the Communists along the upper Mekong and Tonle Sap Rivers during the last dry season. (Although initially successful, these barricades were knocked out in fairly short order by the Cambodian Navy and Air Force.) Another recent KC message referred to plans for using underwater and floating mines. The KC have not in the past used mines on waterways. Assuming there are some available, the introduction of mines would clearly increase the threat to shipping.

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The Prospect

4. Khmer Communist intentions are thus clear. The real question is to what extent the KC will succeed in interdicting the Mekong through the remaining five months or so of the present dry season.

5. The capability of FANK to keep open the Mekong River depends on the government's willingness to divert units presently committed to the defense of Phnom Penh. The KC thrust against the capital's defenses which began on January 1 has now been contained. Although further insurgent attacks are probably in the offing, FANK has some 40,000-45,000 troops around Phnom Penh against about 20,000-25,000 KC troops. FANK should thus be able to shift some units south toward the Mekong choke points and Neak Luong without seriously degrading the capital's security. Moreover, the FANK should be able to move other troops fairly rapidly from outlying provinces where insurgent initiatives have been minimal. Both the Khmer Navy and Air Force have a good capability to support these movements.

6. We believe that the FANK will, in the next few weeks, begin a major push southward along the river from Phnom Penh, and that at the same time the 7,000-8,000 troops at Neak Luong and nearby locations along the river will hold onto the territory they now control. We further believe that such actions will be successful in resecuring the strategic narrows north of Neak Luong. Once that area is secured, operations can be directed against the KC positions in the lower Mekong south of Neak Luong. Here, logistic problems and the terrain will make it difficult for FANK to reestablish as much security as existed before this dry season. From now through May, as the water level of the Mekong declines, the KC will find it easier to attack shipping on the river. Nevertheless, the FANK should be able to strengthen security in the area over what it is at present.

7. It is our best judgment that for the next three months or so the KC cannot maintain a continuous interdiction of the Mekong. At the same time, FANK will be unable to restore security on the river to the level which existed before this dry season, convoys will face an increased threat, and on occasion critical supplies may have to be airlifted into Phnom Penh.

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The insurgents will have a greater opportunity to attack river shipping, and air and naval support to the convoys will be even more important than a year ago. The KC do not have to maintain interdiction to make the Mekong as undependable as a line of supply. For example, it is difficult to assess how ship owners, crew members, river pilots will react to the increased threat. On balance, however, we believe that essential supplies will continue to be shipped.

8. Weighing all these factors, we believe that FANK will be able to provide enough security for the next three months or so to assure the movement of those convoys essential to the continued survival of the country.

9. Beyond the next three months, there is another consideration that could play a larger role as the dry season progresses. At present levels of combat and at present levels of US military aid, the fighting capabilities of the FANK will deteriorate this spring. If that happens, FANK's ability to keep the Mekong open will also decline.

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**MEMORANDUM**

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**NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL**

**(SECRET SPOKE ATTACHMENT)**

**INFORMATION**

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**December 17, 1974**

**MEMORANDUM FOR: GENERAL SCOWCROFT**  
**FROM: WILLIAM L. STEARMAN**  
**SUBJECT: U.S. Response to Khmer Communist  
Interdiction of the Mekong River**

On November 11, you sent a memorandum (Tab C) to Major General Wickham asking Defense to explore possible U.S. responses to an interdiction of the Mekong River by the Khmer Communists. At Tab A is Defense's reply to your request.

Their analysis includes the following key points:

-- It seems unlikely that the Communists will attempt a concerted interdiction of the Mekong;

-- An attempted interdiction could probably not be sustained to the point of forcing the government's downfall. The reason for this is the present relatively low state of Communist preparedness as well as FANK's superior firepower and improved tactical air and naval support;

-- The most useful short term U.S. response to any interdiction effort would be to ensure that stockage levels of combat supplies are adequately maintained. Defense is currently doing this within the tight constraints of the budget for military assistance to Cambodia.

-- For the longer range, selected investment items will have to be funded to ensure the maintenance of Cambodian LOC's. To this end an airlift self-sufficiency package which included 16 C-123K transports is in the final stages of DOD review and approval. Other studies of possible additions to the Cambodian naval forces are also being considered.

The DOD analysis, however, is partly contradicted by a December 17 assessment in the National Intelligence Bulletin (Tab B). This latter item states that the Khmer Communists apparently intend to make a major

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effort to interdict the Mekong River during the next few months. All indications are that this will be the most concerted attempt since their spring 1973 effort. [REDACTED]

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Cambodian army commanders are aware of the Communist intentions and are sending reinforcements to this area. This will raise the government troop strength along the river to over 8,000.

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based for France  
NSC 6156OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301**DECLASSIFIED**

14 DEC 1974

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DEPUTY ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT FOR NATIONAL  
SECURITY AFFAIRS

SUBJECT: Cambodian Assessment (U)

(C) In your memorandum of November 11, 1974, you suggested that it might be useful to explore possible US responses to the threat of a concentrated Khmer Communist (KC) interdiction effort on Cambodian Lines of Communication (LOC).

(S) While it is still too early to predict what actions the enemy intends to follow during this dry season, Cambodian analysts agree the KC will most probably continue their provincial strategy, coupled with rocket attacks against the capital and its airfield and attempt the interdiction of the major LOCs such as the Mekong and Tonle Sap Rivers and Routes 4 and 5. Although significant KC forces are available east of the Mekong, their commitment to a concerted interdiction seems unlikely. The risk of a loss in these areas would far outweigh the success achieved by interdicting the Mekong which in all likelihood could not be sustained to the point of forcing the government downfall. During the course of this wet season initiatives by government armed forces (FANK) continually disrupted enemy plans. Consequently, the enemy has had little opportunity to rest and refit or to conserve its manpower and ammunition. In comparison to last year the KC appear less prepared both physically and psychologically. These factors, together with the FANK 2:1 force advantage over the KC, its fire power advantage, improved tactical air support and strong riverine forces, limit the chances of any near-term KC success.

(S) On the other hand, FANK has also been unable to rest and refit during the wet season. For example, while the 2d Division, which has been committed to the Bassac Operation since August 21, has been able to inflict serious losses on the enemy forces, the division is too weak to exploit these opportunities. Other trends, however, indicate favorable FANK progress. Along the Cambodian-South Vietnam border, combined efforts of the FANK and the South Vietnamese have reduced the vulnerability of Mekong convoys at that point while centralized command of the Mekong corridor under the Khmer Navy (MNK) has simplified control and coordination for convoy security within Cambodia. The KAF has shown steady improvement in the application of close air support and it should be noted that this progress results from actions undertaken as a part of the KAF Tactical Air Improvement Plan approved in Washington a year ago.

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EXECUTIVE ORDER 11652. AUTOMATICALLY DOWNGRADED  
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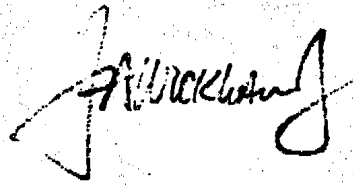
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During the wet season which is just ending, KC forces were able to interdict Routes 4 and 5 at various times. However, once FANK responded to the threat, the KC were unable to withstand government forces and withdrew. Enemy personnel losses resulting from these operations are believed to have been severe and are expected to have a deleterious effect on KC efforts in this dry season.

(S) It would appear the most useful US response to KC interdiction efforts would be to insure that present stockage levels in combat consumables for FANK are adequately maintained. Within the limits of his tightly constrained budget, Chief MEDTC has done and is doing exactly this. Ammunition requirements for the first two quarters have been fully funded, however the status of funding beyond this will remain vague until Congress completes action on Foreign Assistance Bill for FY75. For the longer range, selected investment and attrition items will have to be funded to insure the continuity and maintenance of the Cambodian LOCs. A KAF Airlift Self-sufficiency package, designed to make the KAF self-sufficient in airlift capability by July 1975 is in the final stages of DOD review and approval. It will provide the KAF an airlift capability of 16 C-123K transports and should allow the phasing out of the current civilian contract C-130 flights by July 1975. A second area of concern has been the combat attrition of riverine craft. Since January 1974 a total of 15 craft have been lost to enemy action. To offset these losses, actions are underway by DOD to provide additional riverine craft to MNK. Provision of additional craft is contingent on having available funds, and the approval of Congress to implement the transfer. If successful, these craft should be available for release to Cambodia in February 1975. The key however, will continue to be adequate funding of Cambodia MAP. It is appropriate to reiterate that the purpose of these steps is to support a level of military parity under which both sides can be brought to negotiate a settlement.



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